
Naturalist

These standards apply to Mountaineers-sponsored Naturalist Activities. These activities may be hikes of various lengths, explorations of natural areas, outings in local parks, or a combination of these. These standards apply to any Branch committee sponsoring a naturalist activity, whether as part of a course or as a stand-alone activity.

DEFINITIONS

1. The primary focus of "Naturalist" activities is learning about the natural world. Topics may include identifying flora, fungi, or fauna, discussing geology, learning about edible plants or social uses of plants, exploring ecological or geologic processes, or pursuing the ecology of various plants and animals. This activity is all about helping participants connect more deeply with nature, seeing details that might otherwise be missed. It is about showing participants things in the natural world that might make their experience in the wilds richer and deeper.
2. Naturalist activities must be led by an approved leader who possesses the "Naturalist Leader" badge.
3. A Naturalist activity may be an outing in the front-country or the back-country. It may include other activities such as hiking, walking, multiple stops, and lectures or discussions in the field.

TRIPS

Trips may occur on maintained or unmaintained trails, in urban and suburban parks, along the beach or shoreline, and along roads. Trips will travel at an average pace of 2 mph or less for viewing or studying nature. These may include multiple stops. The party must adhere to leave no trace principles and do no harm to the environment. Mountaineers leaders must have been approved to lead the Naturalist activity, including both the Naturalist component and the other activities.

The following exceptions apply to Naturalist Activities:

- Travel may proceed on snow-covered trails unless the route exposes the party to terrain with avalanche hazards, or where a slip is likely to result in an uncontrolled slide. Avalanche terrain should be avoided whenever possible.
- Parties may make off-trail excursions as long as the group practices appropriate Leave Not Trace principles and the route does not expose any party member to unreasonably hazardous terrain for them to cross, given their skills and experience.
- Travel at an average pace of 2 mph or more, or a hike with conditioning as a primary goal, is not conducive to viewing or studying nature. These trips may not be posted as Naturalist activities.

- Travel in which participants run for any significant portion of the trip is considered a trail run and must follow Activity Standards for Trail Running. These trips may not be posted as Naturalist activities.

DIFFICULTY RATINGS

The difficulty of a Naturalist Outing will be rated using this scale as a general guide, and the rating must be entered on the activity listing with the specific distance and elevation gain communicated to participants in pre-trip communications.

- **Easy (E):** Up to 4 miles and up to 600 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- **Moderate (M):** Up to 8 miles and up to 1200 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- **Difficult (D):** Up to 12 miles and up to 2500 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- **Strenuous (S):** Up to 14 miles and up to 3500 feet of elevation gain round trip.
- **Very Strenuous (VS):** Over 14 miles or over 3500 feet of elevation gain round trip.

The overall Difficulty Rating for a trip or route shall be the lowest rating that satisfies both the distance and elevation gain criteria. For example: a trip with 11 miles of distance and 1000 ft of gain would be a Difficult trip.

LEADER RATING

In addition to the route difficulty, a ***Leader Rating*** must be specified for each activity. This provides the leader with a way to modify the baseline route difficulty based on specifics of how they will lead the trip.

The following are examples of criteria a leader may consider in setting the **Leader Rating**.

- **Casual:** Average pace less than 1 mph and no technical challenges or special skills needed
- **Easy:** Average pace 1-1.5mph, or some route challenges (e.g. rough trail, log crossings, steep terrain)
- **Moderate:** When the initial pace or intermittent pace will be faster than 1.5 mph so the group can reach the places where they plan to explore nature. This might be like hiking at 2.5 mph to Spray Park or Berkeley Park where then the group slows down so they can look at flowers or discuss the geology. The average pace for the overall trip would drop significantly at that point and most likely be < 1.5mph overall.
- **Challenging:** When the trail is rocky and rough, making the travel more strenuous than one might think from the distance or the pace.

The leader must clearly specify that this is to be a naturalist-focused activity, and they must clearly articulate the distance and elevation gain for the route as well as their planned pace (whether it will vary for different parts), any special technical challenges, and special gear, skills, and conditioning requirements of the trip in the trip posting within the activity summary and/or the leaders' notes.

PARTY SIZE

The minimum party size for a Naturalist activity is 3, and the maximum party size is 12 unless other party limits apply.

LEADER QUALIFICATIONS FOR NATURALIST ACTIVITY LEADERS

Leaders must be Mountaineers members, at least 18 years old, with an up-to-date waiver on file. New naturalist leaders are strongly encouraged to go on a minimum of 3 naturalist activities with The Mountaineers, preferably with different leaders, before becoming a naturalist leader themselves. Individual committees have the discretion to require more, or fewer activities based on the applicant's experience and skills.

Leaders must be approved to lead naturalist activities by a Mountaineers Branch Naturalist Committee and entered on their committee's leader list. Once approved by one branch committee to lead Naturalist activities, a leader may request to be added to another branch's Naturalist committee's leader list. The committee chair of the requested branch has discretion to approve or deny leaders and/or to require that the leader complete any additional Branch-specific requirements not met before being added to the roster.

Leaders must demonstrate basic competency in each of the following key elements before being approved to lead a Mountaineers Naturalist Activity. Under each key element, bullets highlight examples of the skills, behaviors, or knowledge factors expected of a Mountaineers Naturalist Leader.

KEY ELEMENT 1: Group Leadership – examples of expected competencies

- Planning and organization
- Screening of participants (as appropriate)
- Communication (clear and effective)
- Ensures that all party members are accounted for periodically and at the trip conclusion
- Respectful, caring, considerate
- Sound judgment and decision-making skills
- Establishes trust
- Focuses on group well-being and success as a whole
- Adapts as required / situational leadership

- Teaches, coaches, and also learns from others
- These skills could be developed by taking a naturalist, hike or backpack leader training course through The Mountaineers, the New Hike Leader Seminar offered by Mountaineers Hiking Committees, The Mountaineers self-paced “Becoming a Mountaineers Leader e-Learning course, or other as determined by the approving committee.

KEY ELEMENT 2: Knowledge of natural history, geology, and ecology & being a naturalist leader.

- **Knowledge:** The individual has demonstrated that they are knowledgeable around one or more natural world topics (see #1 under Definitions section), or demonstrated an equivalency through education or work experience, or demonstrated an equivalency through participation in naturalist programs at The Mountaineers or another nature-oriented group, or has taken and passed the Introduction to the Natural World course.
- **Sharing:** The individual has a clear commitment to passing the love of nature on to others by helping them learn more about the natural world. They show a commitment to lead activities with a primary goal of helping participants deepen their connection to nature, seeing details that the average person might easily miss, and helping them feed a deeper passion for the natural world.

KEY ELEMENT 3: Technical Skill – examples of expected competencies

- Has experience and physical abilities commensurate with the trip being led.
- Practices Minimum Impact Procedures / Leave No Trace 7 Principles.
- Practices good Trail Etiquette.
- Knowledge and use of 10 Essentials.

KEY ELEMENT 4: Navigation– examples of expected competencies

- Effectively navigates trail routes with map and compass and any other appropriate tools to "stay found" (altimeter, watch, GPS).
- A leader may develop these skills by taking Wilderness Navigation, Staying Found, a Map and Compass course, or other as determined by the approving committee.

KEY ELEMENT 5: Mountain Safety Skills– examples of expected competencies

- Shows good understanding of major summer and winter backcountry hazards and how to assess the level of risk if they are going to lead trips into the backcountry.
- Shows good understanding of methods to prevent, mitigate or manage major risk factors.

KEY ELEMENT 6: First Aid and Emergency Preparedness – examples of expected competencies

- Able to handle common first aid situations likely to be experienced on an outing.
- Know the "7 steps of Emergency Response," or an equivalent emergency management process.
- Exhibits a good understanding of how to handle emergency situations such as Late return/after dark/lost hiker/off route/lost.
- Demonstrates problem solving and leadership skills relating to medical emergencies or unexpected weather and trail conditions.
- Knows how to communicate /summon help.
- A leader may develop these skills by taking Wilderness First Aid / Mountaineering-Oriented First Aid, Red Cross First Aid / CPR, Trail Emergency Preparedness, First Aid for Hike-Backpack Leaders, or other as determined by the approving committee.

KEY ELEMENT 7: Knowledge of Standards and Policies– examples of expected competencies

- Familiar with applicable Mountaineers standards or procedures such as carpools; liability; waivers, postings, and closings; ratings.
- Knows Incident reporting expectations.
- Familiar with maximum group size, permitting, and other applicable land management agency regulations.

Key Element 8: Mentoring

- The individual undertakes a mentored hike with an established and approved Naturalist Trip Leader. This would include listing the activity under the mentor's guidance, implementing the activity, and closing out the activity after completion. The mentor must submit a report to the branch Naturalist Committee detailing the successful completion of a mentored hike and the appropriate performance of the new Naturalist Trip Leader. A mentored hike with a naturalist could be waived if the person is already an approved hike or backpack leader and they have demonstrated the knowledge and sharing requirements and have the support of at least one approved Naturalist Leader.

Committees have flexibility to use different combinations of the above methods appropriate to individual leader candidates, maintaining flexibility to recognize experience and training from another activity or from outside the club where it directly applies to the key leader competency requirements.

However, the committee must maintain a mechanism to document their evaluation of a leader candidate against the key criteria so that any outside party can understand the objective method used to qualify the person.

Upon review of the prospective leader's completion of the requirements, the sponsoring committee may grant the applicant a Naturalist Leader Badge and add them to their leader roster, which authorizes them to post and lead Mountaineers Naturalist Activities.

PARTICIPANT QUALIFICATIONS

Unless specified by the leader, there is no prerequisite for signing up for a naturalist activity other than being courteous and respectful of others and the environment; and having a keen interest in learning about the natural world.

Participants are responsible for signing up only for trips that are within their capabilities, wearing suitable clothing / bringing suitable equipment as specified by the leader, and carrying the ten essentials.

RELATED CLUBWIDE STANDARDS

General Standards for All Club Activities

Standards for Activity Co-Sponsorship

- **Mountaineers sponsored activity:** The Mountaineers provides all training, full oversight, and assumes all responsibility for the activity.
Mountaineers leader on-site who has been approved to lead the activity, including both the Naturalist component and activities in all relevant terrain. The Mountaineers has written approval from the land or waterway manager to do the Naturalist activity. These activities may be listed for registration on The Mountaineers website.
- **Mountaineers co-sponsored activity:** The Mountaineers shares the training, oversight, and responsibility for the activity, and has a written agreement that outlines each party's roles/responsibilities.
Mountaineers leader on-site who, at minimum, has been approved to lead activities in all relevant terrain. The Mountaineers has a written agreement with, and current certificate of insurance from, any external entity (co-sponsor) providing oversight and/or resources for the Naturalist work performed during the activity. The Mountaineers and/or the co-sponsoring entity has written approval from the land or waterway manager to do the Naturalist activity. These activities may be listed for registration on The Mountaineers website.
- **External activity:** The Mountaineers provides no training, oversight, or responsibility for the activity.
The Mountaineers does not have a leader on-site and/or does not have a written agreement with, and certificate of insurance from, the external entity running the Naturalist activity. These activities may not be listed for registration on The Mountaineers website.

Comparable Standards

UIAA Standards for Voluntary Leaders and Instructors, October 2006

- Activity Standard 1: Mountain Walking and Trekking
- Leadership Requirements and Guidelines; Appalachian Mountain Club, March 15, 2015